

A Perspective Into School Refusal Anxiety

Written By: Lilia Rosenkranz (she/her)

Within the first month of 5th grade in 2018, I developed a distinct rash around my eye, and at the time, I did not know this would be the reason I would come to miss class for almost 40% of the school year. The development of the rash was my initial excuse not to attend school- I begged my mom to let me stay home because I did not want the other kids to judge me for it. I was petrified, to say in the least, to see anyone that I knew. A week had passed and the rash was significantly less noticeable, but I continued to press my parents into letting me stay home; the reasons for wanting to stay home slowly distorted from the excuse of the rash to complaining of stomach aches, headaches, being tired, and anything conceivable and legit that I could twist into guilt tripping them to let me stay home. They began to take me to doctors because of all these falsely presented symptoms, yet every doctor sent me back home with a note stating that everything was fine and I was perfectly able to go back to school. This marked the beginning of my school refusal anxiety.

After two weeks of presenting this behavior my parents decided to take me to a specialist who incorrectly tried to say it was all in my head. From there they searched for more help and I was soon introduced to a variety of other specialists ranging from therapists to phycologists, to doctors- yet none of them had any reasonable solutions or diagnosis for my situation. Every person we came into contact with was perplexed- nobody had seen such adamant school refusal and nobody knew why or how other than the generalized term of "anxiety." Teachers and staff of my elementary school completely and harshly cut me off from access to any education within the school (including worksheets, material, curriculum guides, or books), leaving my parents and I in a difficult situation. The principal blatantly stated that I would not be able to enter or access anything from the school unless I started to attend class again- a statement that made me realize how inconceivable school refusal anxiety is to those who have not experienced it. My months at home were not what one would initially imagine: a long weekend, a summer break, a snow day, or a holiday. In fact, it was the direct opposite- an experience I would never wish on my own enemy. The three months I spent at home were filled with depression, isolation, and shame. I picture my entire time not attending school as dark and horrifying; I was living in a constant state of mental darkness at ten years old, reluctant and rejective to seeing or coming in contact with any of my close friends, and constantly searching the internet to find someone who related to my situation who could make me feel less alone. I spent days in my room and witnessed the gradual breaking of my family who had no idea what was happening to me. My entire family was in shambles and my parents were more stressed than I had ever seen them in my life.

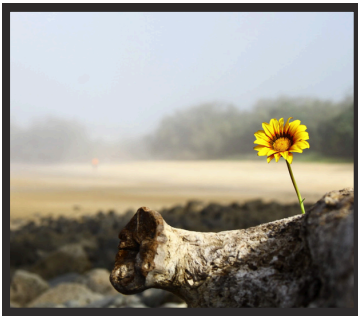


About the Author:

Lilia Rosenkranz (she/her) is a junior in highschool currently living in Massachusetts. After experiencing the impacts of anxiety, specifically school refusal anxiety, she has decided to use her experience to empower and uplift others. Her main goals are to decrease the stigma surrounding this issue and bring greater awareness to it, specifically within youth. Lilia enjoys spending time around children and has served, in many instances, as a voice for children who are having trouble with attending school. In the future she plans to pursue a career within pediatrics and hopes to continue serving her community.



The house was a hub of chaos and confusion and, my little brother who was in third grade at the time, would continuously beg me just to go back to school “so the house would not be scary anymore.” We had visits from both the police and CPS, two traumatic experiences as they were both a result of a disorder that I had absolutely no control over. To adults and other people it was a simple fix: to go back to school. However, this is a complete misconception, and from first-hand living through it, I can testify to the statement that it is uncontrollable and some of the times, as in my case, there’s no real root cause. There was nothing at school that I could pinpoint or blame for making me avidly anxious, it just felt like a force of desperate isolation and shame separated me from my peers and was impossible to cross. Every day, my life felt like it would slip a little more out of my control and fall into the strong influence of school anxiety. I was ten and I had no control over my life. This disorder literally took over me: I couldn’t even recognize the once happy, social, smart, dedicated girl I was. My school refusal became my identity; to students I was known as the girl who disappeared for months from class; to professionals I was seen as an unstable and mentally ill young girl; to my parents I was seen in my worst state possible; to my brother I was seen as the reason my family was falling apart; to my friends I was seen as “ignoring them;” to myself I was someone unrecognizable. I lost all motivation and slowly came to terms with the idea that this would be my life forever.



One day my dad came into the doorway of my room and said something I will never forget: “One day this will be seen as a small blimp in your life”. At the time I looked at him in complete and genuine doubt, thinking, how could this ever be irrelevant if this is my whole identity? Yet from that point forward I realized I could not live in a dark hole forever– nobody could help me but myself. Every day forward, I reluctantly but independently self-motivated myself into taking baby steps until I made the final jump on a random Wednesday: going to a full day of classes.

This didn’t happen overnight, nor should be expected to happen overnight. I have been able to identify the mistakes made by my family, friends, and professionals since nobody really understands the position children with this disorder have until they experience it themselves. School refusal anxiety is a deeply impactful and traumatizing disorder that often goes unrecognized and misunderstood. It’s important for parents and professionals to acknowledge the feelings of embarrassment and shame that can come with missing school, something every child attends, and relatively easily. Children with school refusal anxiety may feel isolated from their friends and peers, leading to internal questions like, “What’s wrong with me?” It’s heart-wrenching to think about how this separation can deepen feelings of loneliness and anxiety, especially when being around others is such an essential part of growing up. For many children, there may be numerous reasons behind their anxiety, yet for me these fears coalesced into one overwhelming thought: the fear of being judged by peers. I constantly questioned if I would be welcomed back and treated normally– I did not want people to treat me in a special way just because I struggled with anxiety. The thought of returning to school and becoming the focus of attention can feel overwhelming and frightening, making it all the more difficult to take that step back into the classroom. As a society we need to dissolve the stigma around school refusal and teach professionals how to properly handle children in this position. In many situations like my own, professionals were the root of more trauma than help.